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I CAN HARDLY WAIT FOR MY DAUGHTER—AND ALL OUR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN—  
TO READ THIS BOOK —ALICE WALKER, AUTHOR OF *THE COLOR PURPLE*

COMPANION TO THE ACCLAIMED TELEVISION SERIES *EYES ON THE PRIZE*

# VOICES OF FREEDOM

*An Oral History of the Civil Rights  
Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*



HENRY HAMPTON and STEVE FAYER

In 1968, campus activism was widespread. Students across the nation demonstrated over such issues as the war in Vietnam, ROTC, university/community relations, and "paternalistic" administrative policies on black as well as interracial campuses. Most black students' demands, however, centered on the call for black studies.

That fall, the first of several conferences exploring the theme of black studies was held at Howard. Called "Toward a Black University," it attracted three thousand students, community activists, scholars, and representatives from a wide range of organizations throughout the country and the world.

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### KING'S LAST CRUSADE, 1967-1968

*"WE'VE GOT SOME  
DIFFICULT DAYS AHEAD"*



Striking Memphis sanitation workers march past the bayonets of Tennessee National Guardsmen, March 28, 1968

Like the students at Howard, like Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Martin Luther King, Jr., understood the importance of delivering victories. But for King, there had been no major triumph since Selma and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. He had become skilled at forcing changes in the law. But he and his colleagues were still searching for ways to force changes in the society.

In Chicago in 1966, and throughout the long, hot summer of 1967, King pointed out that the rhetoric of the Great Society and of the War on Poverty had raised expectations that had not been met. He spoke out



forcefully against the war in Vietnam, making strong connections between international policy and domestic conditions, and earned the enmity of many in government, including President Lyndon Johnson.

It was a difficult time. The movement could no longer depend on the goodwill of the federal government. Instead, it was being driven to challenge that government. Traditional supporters began to fall away. Within the movement itself, the more militant criticized King for moving too slowly; others hoped he would stop pushing so hard and authoritarianizing so many.

King continued to speak out, holding true to his moral compass and demanding changes in America. But few realized how radical and far reaching his vision had become.

Michael Harrington, whose book *The Other America*, published in 1962, has been credited with helping to inspire the War on Poverty, served on Dr. King's research committee, a group that met regularly to discuss pressing issues.

#### MICHAEL HARRINGTON

In conversations with Dr. King in the last years of his life, we always talked about the fact that to abolish poverty, to abolish economic racism, would require changing the structures of American society. That it meant that you had to have a different kind of occupational structure, that you could not have blacks concentrated among the unemployed, the low-paid, the uninteresting jobs, the jobs without any responsibility. That you had to really change that in a radical way. That you had to change the income structure of American society. You had to redistribute wealth, and now that came out as a demand for more progressive taxation. In private, we could talk in a sense much more candidly, much more openly about the need for really basic democratic allocation of investment decisions, and much more democratic allocation of income and wealth and of work. Then when you go public, then you immediately have to think, How do you phrase this message? And Dr. King had a genius for this. How do you phrase this message so that you don't betray the message but you put it in terms which are understandable and accessible to people on the street? But certainly he wouldn't use radical phraseology in many cases for that reason. And I quite agreed with that. Indeed,

in my own book *The Other America* I did not mention the word *socialism* once for precisely that reason. But I always knew that Dr. King, through my conversations, had what I would consider in the good sense of the word a small *d* democratic radical view of what was required in American society.

In March 1967, Marian Wright, a young black attorney with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and an associate of King's, testified before the Senate Labor Committee's subcommittee on poverty about conditions in Mississippi. The next month, the committee held hearings in Jackson.

#### MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

The biggest problem then was survival. I mean, we were having major problems of hunger, even starvation. There were people in Mississippi who had no income. The federal government was shifting over to food stamps from commodities distribution. And while the commodities distribution program of the Department of Agriculture was lousy—didn't provide enough food, it wasn't good enough food—it was free. And when you began to shift to food stamps and charge even two dollars per person, there were people in Mississippi who didn't even have that two dollars. It was very hard to get people from Washington to believe that there were families that could not afford a dollar or two. But the poor were struggling. They were being pushed off the plantations because of the mechanization of cotton, because of the use of chemical weed killing. And while it was a literal bondage system, the plantation system in Mississippi, in the forties, fifties, and sixties, where the Senator Eastlands were subsidized in the hundreds and thousands of dollars by the federal government, the peasants or the tenants on those farms literally could not eat and did not have the most basic survival needs in this rich American country.

I tried to bring the senators down to Mississippi because I was trying to figure out ways of getting the country to see. You know, when the white students came down in 1964, that helped the country to see, because it was their daughters and their sons that were there and they were afraid for them. These were not

you're slower than you want. If you can't walk, crawl, but keep moving.

He was real down that day. Shortly after the visit with Kennedy when I walked in, sitting in his office, and he was like everybody at that time. Kennedy and me and all of us concerned about the poor and what was happening to civil rights and the country turning itself away from it, about what we were going to do next. And I told him that Bobby Kennedy said he ought to bring the poor people to Washington. And as simply as Bobby Kennedy had said it, King instinctively felt that that was right and treated me as if I was an emissary of grace here, or something that brought him some light. Out of that, the Poor People's Campaign was born.

William Rutherford, a black Chicago native and skilled public relations man who had spent much of his adult life abroad, had organized the Friends of SCLC in Europe in 1966. In the summer of 1967 King appointed him executive director of SCLC.

#### WILLIAM RUTHERFORD

The staff was really quite busy and quite involved in things when Dr. King looked up and in his reasoning—I'm paraphrasing, of course—he said, "Fine, we now have the right to vote. Fine. We can now go to any restaurant, any hotel, anyplace we want to in America, but we don't have the means. So what good does it do for people to go to any restaurant in the world if you don't have the money to pay for a meal?" So, he says, we've got to attack the whole issue of poverty and economic deprivation. And that was his thinking: his reasoning for pushing for a Poor People's Campaign. But, of course, when this has to impact on people that have been fighting to get people registered and into polling places, people who have been fighting to get education, people who have been fighting for the right to go into public accommodations, the idea of attacking something as vast and as amorphous as poverty, of course, wasn't very appealing. So I'd say that basically almost no one on the staff thought that the next priority, the next major movement, should be focused on poor people on the question of poverty in America.

Andrew Young was by this time executive vice president of SCLC.

#### ANDREW YOUNG

SCLC was always a battle of egos. We were like a team of wild horses. Each one had very strong opinions and their own ideas about the way the movement should go, and Dr. King encouraged that. And our meetings were loud and raucous, and he sat quietly by until we fought issues out, and then he would usually decide. James Bevel wanted to keep us in northern cities in a movement to end slums. Hosea Williams felt as though we should stay in the South and do voter registration. Jesse Jackson was beginning to develop Operation Breadbasket, which was an attempt to organize nonviolently to get jobs. I was probably more inclined to stay south, because people forget that SCLC at that time had a budget of less than a million dollars.

SCLC board member Marian Logan also was not enthusiastic.

#### MARIAN LOGAN

When I first heard about it, I was really very apprehensive. I thought that as it began to develop, as I heard about how it was developing, it was becoming much too big and unwieldy for us to be able to handle. And also, considering the tenor of the times, I wasn't sure that we could be a success. I wasn't sure that Congress, and the powers that be in Washington, D.C., would be welcoming—'cause it wasn't like '63, which was such a glorious march, and glorious day. This bringing of poor people to the seat of government was like throwing it in their faces, and I don't think too many of the officials of Washington was gonna take that with any great grace. So I had many reservations about it.

In early December, King announced, without specifying SCLC's intention to bring poor people of all races to Washington around April 1 and to "stay until America responds." Plans remained to be formulated.



people who necessarily had been attuned to the problems of the black poor in America at that time. So one has to have someone to lift the window. After the young people left at the end of the summer of '64, the problems were still left. They were different. They were changing. We had begun to make a difference. But there was so much suffering that remained to be alleviated. So one was trying to find new ways to capture the imagination and attention of the American public. Therefore, I went to see if I could get the senators to see that it was still bad, and indeed was getting worse in many ways, and that hunger was growing, even though we had the right to vote. The cost of that for many is that they got kicked off the plantations and lost that little bit of money, unjust as it was, that they had had to survive. And so we had to put another means in place.

I told the committee, please come and see for yourselves, because they didn't quite believe me when I talked about how the conditions of life, the poverty, was getting worse and the people really didn't have enough to eat in Mississippi. So they came, and Bobby Kennedy came with them, and while they were there to examine the impact of the poverty program on Mississippi blacks and whites, I used it as an opportunity to tell them about growing hunger in the Delta. And they were shocked and, happily, one or two of the senators agreed to stay over and to go up in the Delta to see for themselves whether it was true that people were starving. Bobby Kennedy agreed to be one of those senators.

I was very moved by what Bobby Kennedy did when we went to visit [a black family] in Cleveland, Mississippi. Without cameras, because he was Bobby Kennedy some newspapermen had come along. We went inside a very dark and dank shack. It was very filthy and very poor, and when we walked through from front to back together, there was in the kitchen a mother who was scrubbing in a tin tub, washing clothes. There was a child sitting on a dirt floor, filthy. And there was very little light there, and he got down on his knees and he tried to talk to the child and get a response from the child. He kept poking or feeling the child and trying to get some response. And I remember watching him in near tears, because I had this complicated feeling. I was moved by it and wondering whether I would have gotten down on that dirt floor. But deeply respect that that he did. He could do almost anything after that and I trusted him from that time on, just as a human being. And then he went out to the backyard where the

reporters were waiting. And he was correctly angry. But from that moment on, I knew that somehow he would be a major force in trying to deal with hunger in Mississippi for children.

Later that summer, after watching President Johnson announce the government's military response to the civil disorders in Detroit, Robert Kennedy told an aide, "It's over. The president is just not going to do anything more. That's it. He's through with domestic problems, with the cities.... He's not going to do anything. And he's the only man who can."

In August, with urban uprisings still sweeping through America's inner cities, Marian Wright visited Kennedy at his Virginia home, Hickory Hill, on her way back to Mississippi.

#### MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

It was a gorgeous day and he was lounging out around the pool at Hickory Hill, and we went through our usual small chat about what was going on. And when I was leaving—I had also told him I was going to stop back through Atlanta and see Dr. King—he said, "Tell him to bring the poor people to Washington." That it's time for some visible expression of concern for the poor. I had been expressing to him my frustration that hunger was still going on, and obviously he was still frustrated that the Agriculture Department was so slow in doing something about it or the Johnson administration was hesitant to move, so he thought that there really needed to be some push, some national visible push. But it was a very simple suggestion: Tell Dr. King to bring the people to Washington.

This was a period of white reaction and backlash. It was a period when the war was becoming a much more divisive force, where the problems of black and poor people were being left behind and people thought they were annoyances, and we'd had a lot of violence in northern cities. And Martin King was really depressed. One of the things I always remembered about him from my early student days was how he was able to share his uncertainties, share his not knowing what to do next. I remember his Founders' Day speech when I was a senior at Spelman College, when he talked about taking that one step even if you can't see the whole way and how you just have to keep moving, even if

turn away from nonviolence, so he was being attacked for being too much of a pacifist. Too many people. Not willing to really fight back. Not willing to use force against racism. On the other hand, he was being attacked by Lyndon Johnson, and even by the Hubert Humphrey liberals, for going too far to the left. For being in the activist movement. For taking part in the April 1967 demonstration against the war in New York. And I had the feeling that his sense was that the number of people who really supported him now had really sunk very much.

Within that context, we then talked about the Poor People's Campaign. In a sense, the Poor People's Campaign was certainly not repudiated by Dr. King of his opposition to the war, but it was an attempt to then go back and refocus on basics, and perhaps more importantly, to mobilize a mass movement.

The state of preparation for the poor people's march was very chaotic. That was typical of Dr. King. Careful organization and planning was not his strong suit. He was a genius at improvising. What he did understand was that his strength was in his appeal to masses of people. That he had to mobilize those masses given the defections he felt both to his right and his left. And what I said to him at that meeting was whatever else we do, what we have to do is we have to come up with some demands that we can actually win on. That we can't ask for the moon, or we can ask for the moon and should ask for the moon, but we should also make some demands, and I don't remember the precise ones that I urged, but they would have been winnable demands in terms of legislation. And I would say this is something where Dr. King and I always agreed. That part of his genius was to understand that you could not have a movement simply based on promises of the future. That you had to deliver. And he had delivered on voting rights. He had delivered on public accommodations. He had delivered on the Montgomery bus boycott, and so many other things. And he understood now, above all, was the time to deliver.

In February, thirteen hundred sanitation workers, nearly all of them black, went on strike in Memphis. Angered by the city's sending twenty-two black workers home without pay because of an item of whether toilet workers were not sent home and they received pay, the strikers were demanding that their union be recognized. So Dr. James Lawson, now pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, invited King to speak at a rally

in support of the strikers. King recognized the chance to link the economic conditions of the strike with the civil rights movement and arrived in Memphis on March 18 to address a mass meeting.

#### ANDREW YOUNG

The staff was really disturbed that Martin would even consider going to Memphis. We had chartered out fifteen cities that we were going to try to organize. We were trying to organize poor whites, Hispanics, southern blacks, northern blacks—I mean, there was just a tremendous organizing job, and I didn't know how you could take on anything else. And he said, "Well, Jim Lawson has been around for so long and here are garbage workers on strike, he just wants me to come in and make a speech and I'll be right back."

Bill Lucy, an organizer for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, had come to Memphis to work with the strikers.

#### BILL LUCY

In March, when the issue began to be discussed about inviting Dr. King to come to Memphis, it grew out of the frustrations of the city and, I guess, maybe the media really putting a lid on what was taking place in Memphis. We were forty-seven days into the strike and nobody knew it except us and the city of Memphis. Roy Wilkins had come to town. Bayard Rustin had come to town to speak in support of the strike, but still there was no understanding beyond the city as to what was taking place. The invitation to Dr. King to come was that we believed that he would not only lend his moral support to the strike, but he was in the midst of organizing the Poor People's Campaign, and we just really thought that that would be a good movement for him to identify with, that there would be national media with him that would, in effect, take an interest in what was taking place.

What I remember from that night of that first speech was the incredible ability that King had to understand and interpret the issues and what was taking place. He had not been there before, and he had had the most minimal of briefings. But he clearly



# THE POOR PEOPLE'S CAMPAIGN

During the fall period he worked very hard, and all into the early part of the year. And in the spring he went all over this country talking about it and promoting the idea, and most people who knew him felt that he was working as if this was going to be his last job. I mean, we were very concerned about him, but the fact is that he could see, I think, a way that this could all come together, and he felt very confident that this could be a real test of how nonviolence can work to change the lives of people economically. When the president asked him, "Dr. King, what if you fail?" he said, "It will not be Martin King, Jr., who failed. It will be America that failed." He believed very firmly, reaffirmed his commitment in nonviolence as the most important weapon available to these people. And he said, "If I be the sole person on earth who clings to the belief and practice of nonviolence, I will be that person."

It was almost like a political campaign three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, but you never take a break, it never ends, it's continuous, year after year. And that's the Poor People's Campaign. It was one of those frantic periods, where it seems that Martin was just continually going, and he had so much anxiety about all this working out and making it happen successfully.

## REVEREND AMBROSIO

We did a great deal of planning and work while organizing for the Poor People's Campaign. We used cars, and we used small chartered airplanes, and we went all over the states of Mississippi and Alabama where poor people lived, trying to organize and get them aroused.

In Marks, Mississippi, I well remember, we visited a day-care center. And Dr. King was moved to tears there. There was one apple, and they took this apple and cut it into four pieces for four hungry waiting students. And when Dr. King saw that, and that is all that they had for lunch, he actually ended up crying. The tears came streaming down his cheek. And he had to leave the room.

Plans for the campaign began to take shape over the winter. Daniel Schorr, then a reporter for CBS, attended a press conference King held in Washington on February 7, 1968.

## DANIEL SCHORR

At this press conference network reporters, including myself, constantly pushed him to try to say something as militant as possible. We were interested in getting the kind of sound bites that would get on the evening news. And in fact, as I went back over the script of that day, I realized that we did get him to say things like the first phase of this march would be educational and then if that didn't work that it would be disruptive; that they were going to stay in Washington until they got a response.

When the press conference was over, I was waiting for my camera crew to pack up and saw Reverend King sitting there looking somewhat disconsolate. And I walked up to him, sitting at the table there, and asked why he seemed to be so mournful and he said, "Well, it's because of what you people in television are doing. I don't know if you are aware of it, but you keep driving people like me, who are nonviolent, into saying more and more militant things, and if we don't say things militantly enough for you, we don't get on the evening news. And who does? Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. By doing this, you are, first of all, selecting the more militant black leaders to be civil rights leaders, because everybody sees your television programs. And secondly, you're putting a premium on violence." That gave me a lot to think about.

## MICHAEL HARRINGTON

The last meeting of the research committee that I attended in the early spring of 1968, we did two things. One was we discussed the general political situation, which we always did at those meetings. And it struck me that Dr. King was very pessimistic, deeply disturbed at the way things were going. On the one hand, he was being increasingly attacked from within the black movement. There was a surge of nationalism. The Black Panthers had begun to come on the scene. There was SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. There had been a

the Poor People's Campaign. That this was an aside that he really didn't have time for or shouldn't have taken time for. But responding to a friend, he did so.

When he did awake, he talked about what he saw happening with the press, and he saw this as a tremendous setback for his efforts in Washington. He knew that those who had criticized his developing the Poor People's Campaign would say, "You see, this is what will happen in Washington, D.C., if you bring all of these people here." That a similar situation will occur. And he just saw people floating who were in opposition to the Poor People's Campaign.

Marian Logan was among the millions who had seen footage of the day's events on the evening news. That night, King phoned her.

MARIAN LOGAN

I was upset because I had seen the expression on his face, and I saw Ralph, of course, who was with him, he was distressed. And I just told him, I said, "Martin, I think you need to get your ass out of Memphis."

And he said, "Well, darling," he said, "you know we have to keep going; this is our movement."

I said, "But you haven't prepared those garbage workers." I know generally have, you know, we'd send Andy in and Bayard, and a few others too. To get people organized in nonviolence and make them understand how important it was. And these garbage workers were not trained like that. And it was really a polyglot group of men, it was a union movement. But Martin wouldn't give in, because he just had to go back and prove that he could lead a nonviolent march of garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968.

King left Memphis after a press conference the next day, Friday, March 29, vowing to return for another march. But this new march would be overseen by SCLC staffers after combining nonviolent training sessions and working in advance with the local leadership.

That night, King was back in Atlanta at the home of Ralph and Juanita Abernathy.

JUANITA ABERNATHY

He wanted to come here because if you go to a restaurant, then you got to answer questions about, well, what happened to the march? Why the violence? And he was not in the kind of mood to deal with answering those questions, because Dr. King was very sensitive about anything that was in opposition to what his philosophy was. And he didn't want anybody identifying him with the violence that had taken place, 'cause you know some of it was done by us, by blacks. And that hurt. And he just sort of felt that part of his reputation had been damaged and tarnished a bit. So he didn't want to have to deal with answering questions on that. And coming here, he would not encounter that. So we sat that night. And talked about light things. And talked about me. And talked about Ralph. We talked about each other. Talked about the movement. And just chit-chat. But nothing serious. And we did not talk about Memphis. The news came on. And whenever there was a flash on TV about it, he got very quiet and he was really, really sort of depressed. And I think he was more depressed that night, I believe, than I'd ever seen him.

On Saturday, King held an emergency staff meeting. One of those in attendance was Jesse Jackson, who had been working with SCLC since the Chicago campaign.

JESSE JACKSON

He had this vision we should wipe out poverty, ignorance, and disease, that you couldn't do it on an ethnic basis. That it was never going to be in the plan to wipe out black poverty that would leave the Hispanics in poverty, or whites or women in poverty, or Native Americans in poverty. So we had to pull people together. And on this Saturday morning he said, "I've had a migraine headache for three days, and sometimes because our movement is divided. I feel like turning around, just quitting, or maybe becoming president of Morehouse College." And then he said, as if something struck him, "But we will always be able to turn a



understood that the struggle was really about a new kind of people—people who worked forty hours a week and still lived in poverty, and he was able to arrange his presentation to demonstrate to the crowd that he understood this, and to give them a sense that their struggle was a legitimate struggle, that they had every right to carry on.

The crowd at Mason Temple numbered fifteen thousand. King was so moved by their struggle that he decided to return to Memphis to lead a march.

King came back on March 28. Bernard Lee and Ralph Abernathy were at his side when the march took an unexpected turn.

#### BERNARD S. LEE

I was a little upset that he didn't have some of our national staff in the march organizing prior to its beginning. It was just a mass of people. I don't think the leadership of the march was ever in control. As we marched, I began hearing these noises behind me of glass, broken glass, taking place. And as I continued to look back, and try to jump up over the crowd and see what was going on, I could see and hear that there was tremendous disturbance not very far from us, behind us, in the march. And the people in the march were breaking store windows. And finally we marched, I guess maybe about a block, might have gone two blocks, but I made a decision that Martin Luther King didn't need to be in that march because it had become disruptive. It had become violent internally and the leadership needed to deal with that march and Martin Luther King needed to leave the march.

#### KEITH ABERNATHY

At that moment, Bernard Scott Lee, who was Dr. King's traveling assistant, stopped a car and asked the young lady if he could use this car to get Dr. Abernathy and Dr. King out of this situation. And the young lady agreed, and she got over, and Bernard Lee became our driver. And we were taken down to the river, the Mississippi River. And we stopped the motorcycle police at that point and asked them if we could use their service to get Dr. King

out of the area. And a policeman said, "Where do you want to go?"

And I said, "The Peabody Hotel."

And he said, "We cannot go to the Peabody Hotel, because there's nothing but violence over there."

And we said, "Well, what about the Lorraine Motel?"

And the policeman said, "We cannot go to the Lorraine Motel because there's nothing but violence over there. And tear gas is everywhere." And he said, "Well, I will take you to a place."

And undoubtedly they had radioed ahead, because he took us to the headquarters hotel of the Holiday Inn. It is on the banks of the Mississippi River, and it's a plush hotel. They already had waiting for us a suite that had a living area and two bedrooms, and one was for Dr. King, and one was for Bernard Lee and myself.

Many stores along the march route were damaged, 280 people were arrested, 60 people were injured, and a black sixteen-year-old boy was killed by police gunfire. Later, the FBI circulated a memorandum to newspaper editorial offices across the country citing the breakdown of the nonviolent march in Memphis as a precursor to possible violence during King's Poor People's Campaign in Washington. Several papers wrote stories that followed the FBI's logic: The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* virtually reprinted the FBI memorandum as an editorial against the Poor People's Campaign.

#### BERNARD S. LEE

We went to the motel. He didn't say anything. He just asked where was Jim, Jim Lawson. Jim, I'm sure, was out there trying to deal with the march. I think Andy was with us as well, if I'm not mistaken. But he just, he got on the bed and just rested, just went to sleep. I recall Ralph Abernathy getting a spread and putting it over him and he just slept through it. He just slept. He slept his discontent off. But I knew he was terribly, terribly moved, terribly upset by the events of this march, because deep in his heart and his mind, he knew that he would be criticized for the violent outburst of the march. And he was a victim of circumstances. He had been advised not to go to Memphis in the beginning, that we needed to be going to Washington to try to mobilize and develop

of thought to it told about his personal experiences, both high points and low points. It went into it a message that the strikers were entitled to continue their struggle, and certainly entitled to the broad base of support that they had built across the city. He then went on to talk about the vision that he saw both for them and for himself. And it was one of the most dramatic speeches I've ever heard. It was not negative, it was really very, very high. When it ended, the entire church at Mason Temple just went wild with excitement. I mean, he had touched a chord that was so deeply rooted in all of the people—it went far beyond the strikers to community people—and he had shared with them his view of not only himself but his role in society.

The Reverend James E. Smith was one of the Memphis ministers supporting the strikers.

#### JAMES E. SMITH

It was an overcoming spirit in Mason Temple that night. We knew that we were going to win. Dr. Abernathy spoke well. But we were waiting for Dr. King. And because he was in town there was an overcoming mood, an overcoming spirit in that place. When Dr. King spoke that night we knew that we were going to win. There was something about Dr. King. A man who could walk with kings, but he was just as simple when he spoke that all of us understood him. Never met a man like that before.

#### ANDREW YOUNG

The next day I was in the federal court, trying to testify to get the injunction lifted so that we could have a march. I was in court all day long, on the witness stand a good part of that day.

We got the injunction thrown out and we got our permission to march, and I guess about four-thirty or five o'clock I came back to the Lorraine Motel and I found Martin and A.D. [King] and Ralph and everybody gathered there, and they'd been eating, had lunch, and were talking and clowning. And when I came in, Martin just grabbed me and threw me down on the bed and started beating me with a pillow. I mean, he was like a big kid,

and he was fussing because I hadn't reported to him, and I tried to tell him I was on the witness stand. I'm here in the federal court, and he was just standing on the bed swinging the pillow at me, and I'm trying to duck with him saying, "You have to let me know what's going on." [Laughs.] And finally I snatched the pillow and started swinging back and everybody—it was sort of like after you make a touchdown and everybody piles on everybody. I mean, people just started throwing pillows and piling on top of everybody and laughing and going on. And then he stopped and said, "Let's go, you know we're due at dinner at six," and it was at that time about six o'clock. And he went on up to his room to put on a shirt and tie. I went out in the courtyard waiting for him and started shadowboxing with James Orange, who is about six-five and two hundred eighty pounds. I mean, James could slap me on the ground with his little finger. But I was clowning around with him and Martin came out and asked, "You think I need a coat?" And we said, "Yeah, it's pretty cool and you've had a cold, you better go back and get a coat." And he said, "I don't know whether I need a coat." And the next we know, a shot—well, I thought it was a car backfiring or a firecracker.

#### RALPH ABERNATHY

I heard what sounded like a firecracker. And I jumped. And when I jumped I saw only his feet laying on the balcony. And I immediately rushed to his side and I started patting his cheek, saying, "Martin, Martin, Martin. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid. This is Ralph. This is Ralph. This is Ralph." And I got his attention. And he calmed down. His eyes were moving and he became very, very calm.

And finally Andrew Young came up the steps and said, "Oh God. Oh God, Ralph. It is over."

And I became angry with Andrew Young and said, "Don't you say that, Andy. Don't you say that. It is not over."

And Billy Kyles, whom we were going to eat with, came up and I said, "Billy, get me an ambulance." And I heard nothing but a loud cry from our room. And I said, "Billy, keep yourself together. I want an ambulance."

And he said, "Ralph, all of the lines are busy. All of the lines are busy."



minutes into a plus. We can turn a stumbling block to a steppingstone. Sometimes my works tend to be in vain but then the Holy Spirit comes, I'm revived again." He preached himself out of the depression. He said, "Let us move on from here to Memphis."

On Sunday, March 31, President Johnson announced to the nation that he would not be a candidate for reelection in November. King found some hope in Johnson's announcement. Perhaps someone more active in helping the poor would soon be installed in the White House.

On Wednesday, April 3, King and Abernathy returned to Memphis to meet with local leaders about the new march, now tentatively scheduled for April 8. That afternoon, a temporary restraining order was imposed against the march. SCLC planned to challenge it in court the next day. King announced he would head the march whatever the outcome. That evening, King was supposed to address a crowd at Mason Temple.

#### RAPID ALTERNATIVITY

There was a tornado warning in Memphis that evening. And it was raining, raining, and wind was blowing everywhere. I believe a little tornado came to Memphis also. And he knew that there would not be a big crowd. And he said to me, in the meeting, with the staff around, "I want you to go and speak this evening at the mass meeting." He had become so accustomed to large crowds, and I said, "Oh no, don't send me. Send Jesse or Andy or one of the other fellows." And he said, "Ralph, there is only one person in the world that can speak for me. And that is Ralph David Abernathy. Will you go?" And I said, "Yes, I will go." And so I went. [But] when I got in and was seated, I knew that those photographers and those cameramen were looking for Dr. King. And it was not meant for me. And so I asked, "Where is the nearest telephone?" And I decided that I would go find that telephone and call for Dr. King. And Dr. King said, "Okay, Ralph, I will be right there." And I made a second pitch. I said, "Martin, you know I would not ask you to come ordinarily, but these people want to hear you, and they want to see you," and he said, "David, that is not important. I will be there. Have I ever told you that I would do anything that I did not do? I will be there as soon as the car

can bring me over." And when he got over there to the church, in fifteen minutes, the cameramen were glad to see him, and the people were glad to see him, and the presiding officer says to me, "Which one of you wants to be first tonight?"

Abernathy gave a lengthy introduction of his friend, who then delivered a sermon that was to become known as the mountain-top speech. King spoke of the need to march again in Memphis, of the importance of ministers being socially active in what he termed "a relevant ministry." "It's all right to talk about 'long white robes over yonder,' in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's all right to talk about 'streets flowing with milk and honey,' but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee."

He spoke in some detail about the need for the black community to launch an economic withdrawal from its oppressors. He listed products for his listeners to boycott, banks, people of goodwill should support, black insurance companies who should receive the policies of black clients.

His aides had heard versions of it on other occasions, but for the strikers and their supporters, his last words that evening were new. "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

#### But, Lucy

I guess that you could say the mountaintop speech was perfect for the kind of speech that it was. It was an inspiring speech, one that Dr. King had really given what appeared to be a good deal

# 25

## RESURRECTION CITY, 1968 "THE END OF A MAJOR BATTLE"



It had always been a tenet of the civil rights movement that it could not surrender to violence and survive. Students and veteran activists on the Freedom Rides were beaten nearly to death, and others rode in to take their places. There were deaths in Mississippi; still more demonstrators came. There were deaths in Selma; still more marched.

Just four weeks after the April 4 murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., SCLC's new head, Ralph Abernathy, set out from Memphis to lead the last group of marchers to Washington, D.C., opening the Poor People's Campaign. By bus, car, foot, and mule train, poor people moved up out of the South, across from the west, and down from New York City to take up residence on the Mall near the Lincoln Memorial, where only five years earlier a crowd of 250,000 had gathered to hear King share his dream.

In Memphis, as the marchers set out, Abernathy said, "For any of you who would linger in the cemetery and tarry around the grave, I have news for you. We have business on the road to freedom. . . . We must



poor to white America that you can kill the leader but you cannot kill the dream."

On May 13, on the Mall in Washington, Abernathy welcomed the poor to a settlement he christened Resurrection City. It was a brave name for the city of tents and sheds on public land, and a difficult undertaking for many who still mourned their absent leader.

#### KARL AMERNATHY

I felt that I had lost a part of me. I felt that I had to walk this handsome valley now by myself. I knew all of the people of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the staff, I knew them well. And I had worked with them. I had hired most of them. And I knew their weaknesses and I knew their strong points. But I felt that I would have to walk the valley of life the rest of my days by myself without Martin Luther King.

Well, we vowed that we were going to stand together and stick together. Jim Bevel, speaking for the staff of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said, "I loved Dr. King. In many respects I loved Dr. King more than I love Jesus. But Dr. King is now dead. But we have our leader. And our leader is Ralph David Abernathy. And we are going on to Washington, but by the way of Memphis."

#### WILLIAM RUTH RICHARD

The purpose and the goal of the Poor People's Campaign was to focus the attention of the nation and the world on poverty. The technique, the tactic being used, was to gather the poorest of the poor in the nation's capital, the heart of the wealthiest country in the world, to camp there, these homeless, hungry people, in the heart of this city and its fabulous malls situated between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, take the plea and the complaint of the poor to each of the government agencies, and take them to the Department of Agriculture, where they deal with food. To take them to the Department of Justice, where they deal with laws and the application of laws. To take them to the Department of the Interior, where the Chicanos and the Native Americans have very serious problems of land tenure and so on. The thrust, the tactic of the Poor People's Campaign was in

dealing with our own government to focus and attract the attention of the world on these problems, which are everpresent, but which by and large are largely ignored by the masses of Americans or which are not really focused on by the masses of Americans.

#### HARRY McPHERSON

The reaction of the White House was a very unhappy one to the notion of people coming across the bridge in their wagons and camping on the Mall, camping in Lafayette Square just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House, that image of hundreds and hundreds of people representing the poor but also seeming to be the tools of a political leadership that was seeking to put pressure on the government to bring about change that could not be brought about overnight. Our shoulders sagged. They were going to ask for things that we couldn't provide. They were going to make a lot of people mad, people who were already growing restive. The first effects of the affirmative action programs were being felt in the country. A lot of white workers were getting sore with a feeling that they were being bypassed not through any fault of their own, but in order to advance blacks who had been held down. So the temper was not a good one.

I can tell you that from within the White House, sitting in the West Wing, with the windows open, you could hear people singing "We Shall Overcome" in the tents in Lafayette Square, which was mixed in on occasion with the sounds of people chanting along Pennsylvania Avenue. "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" So you had the antiwar protesters on Pennsylvania Avenue and the anti-poverty protesters in Lafayette Square. Both of them asking for immediate change. And out in the country you had the public opinion polls changing pretty radically and people getting more and more angry, more and more looking for a president who would bring the war to a quick end, a president who would enforce order in the cities.

#### ANDREW YOUNG

Resurrection City was a community that was designed for fifteen hundred, and many, many more people than that showed up. They were fifteen hundred well-trained, well-disciplined demon-

situations that were to be recruited from around the country. And in the middle of this process Martin Luther King was killed. So that set us back, both in training and in building of Resurrection City. Everybody wanted to be a part of the Poor People's Campaign after Martin's death. The funeral was the same way. We would have thought that ten, fifteen thousand people coming to would have been all we could handle. There were probably closer to a hundred thousand people, and yet we made it. But Resurrection City was not just more people than we could handle on hand, there were people in Resurrection City who were placed there, I think, to disrupt and create discontent. So we were constantly fighting a battle both inside and outside.

At its peak, Resurrection City housed some 2,500 citizens—most of them black, 200 Native Americans, and a few dozen Hispanics. There was also a group of about 100 poor whites, but many of them complained that they had no voice in the activities and served only briefly.

#### Bernard S. Lee

And to compound it all, it rained every day. Every day we had rain. And the stench from the rain on the soil, which was fertilized, the fertilizer itself just created a terrible odor. So this compounded our problems. Some people would say, Well, I hadn't volunteered for this. This is not what I envisioned. And that, the rain in itself, the daily rain, created to an extent monumental problems. Because it was very muddy. Sometimes, even though we had placed boards on the ground as a path for people to walk on, still some would wind up in the mud, many times. I recall myself just winding up in the mud, my boots just terribly muddy. And some of the residents didn't have boots. So it was really, it was an awful experience.

But the dividends were there as a result of their having participated and been in Washington in the Poor People's Campaign. The dividends did come, and it was not an activity that was in vain. But we had those human problems, hard to get some services to our people, and it was long sometimes before we could get the money to get some of the things that the residents really needed. But we established a city, and that's the fact that history

must always recall. That for good or bad, whatever, however it perceives it, we did establish a city and people did live in that city. And we had all of the problems that any urban city would have. People would get angry with each other and they would commit violence against each other. All of the social and urban problems rested right in that city. We saw the reenactment of a city. We had created it. And in my estimation that was good. I mean, just as you have in the city of Washington or any other city, there were those human problems that existed. Some did not think we had effective leadership. Some felt that we had too much leadership and it did create problems within the city, there's no question about it. But we carried on, we did persevere. And I think we were better for it.

#### Michael Harrington

I was invited to Resurrection City. When I got to Resurrection City, I already knew from reading the newspaper reports that there had been a lot of violence, a lot of disorganization. That the beloved community was not there by the Washington Monument. And I lectured. Everything was given rather impressive names. And it was called the Poor People's University of Resurrection City. It was a group of people who were coming down and giving lectures during the day.

A group of people were sitting on the ground gathered around and a black man among them, I think with emotional problems, decided that I was the incarnation of white racism. And he wanted to know why I, who had been in the process of giving a talk attacking racism, talking about what was needed in order to end racism and poverty in the United States, was in favor of racism and poverty in the United States. And he got very agitated. And I became concerned that he could physically attack me. The meeting sort of came to a very unhappy ending, where my message didn't get across, and it's very hard to concentrate on your talk when you're worried that somebody might be about to jump you. The man left, and I left to go and catch a plane and to come back to New York, and literally ran away from the meeting. I wanted to get as far away from this place as I could. On the one hand, I was delighted that I was out of this miserable situation and I no longer had to be literally physically fearful. But on the



## DANIEL SCHORR

Mired down in mud and misery, the people in Resurrection City clearly needed some action to lift their spirits. So every now and then somebody would come and organize something for them to do.

On this day, late in May, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, of whom I had not been aware before this date, took three hundred of them, they marched up to the Department of Agriculture. He took them down to the cafeteria. They picked up trays. I saw Jackson tell them to go through the line and to give all the checks to him. And so, one by one, they took food, they went through the checkout counter, and they pointed to Jackson, who was standing there, tall, six footer, nodding, smiling, and they said, "It's got the check for all of us. And when they'd all gone through the line, Jackson took a megaphone and he announced to everybody, "Okay," he said, "this government owes us a lot. And they've just begun to pay a little bit of it with this lunch."

Three weeks after the opening of Resurrection City, the Poor People's Campaign lost a powerful ally. Robert Kennedy was fatally shot in the early morning hours of June 5, having just won the California Democratic presidential primary. He died on June 6.

## ANDREW YOUNG

Following Martin Luther King's death, immediately after we left the hospital we had a meeting and we said that if you let people stop the dream when the dreamer is slain, then you just encourage people to keep on killing your leadership. So the most important thing was to pick up the movement and keep it going. So we didn't have time to grieve, we didn't have time to even miss Martin Luther King. We had to go on with his work. And so we pushed ourselves even though we were probably all emotionally and internally on the verge of exploding. And we pushed ourselves right on through the early days of the Poor People's Campaign. But then on the sixth of June, right after Martin's death on the fourth of April, Robert Kennedy's assassination just brought everything to a halt, and I think we began to grieve about Martin

after he died, it dawned on me that this was an end of an entire period of my life that went back to 1954 when I had joined the Harlem NAACP, right after *Brown* versus *Board of Education*, the desegregation opinion. And that one of the most marvelous political movements in America in the form which it took under Martin Luther King from 1955 to 1968 had come to an end. And that the beloved community was gone forever.

In this time Marian Wright had moved to Washington

## MARIAN WRIGHT ELLIOTT

I don't recall specific plans for the Poor People's Campaign. They were coming to Washington out of a general and urgent need. They were hungry, there was growing poverty, but they had lost their leader. We were a bit bedagled as the campaign began, and when I began to meet with them when they came here, it was very clear that the specific position papers and what they would ask each agency to do or what they would ask the president to do needed to be fleshed out. So I got myself an instant job of developing those position papers.

We were all very hurt. We had lost Dr. King. We were trying very hard to carry on. We were determined that the poor would be seen and heard. It was such a struggle. I mean, what I remember most about Resurrection City was the mud and the rain which came along with the poor people, how haphazard the logistics were, and how hard it was to go out and try to get them to be witnesses, but how willing and open they always were in a very new setting, about going to do this. And I always have felt somewhat schizophrenic, because on one hand, going out to Resurrection City to identify and talk to witnesses, at the same time to try to craft what they said in a way in which Washington bureaucrats can hear it. So I ran this back-and-forth thing from sort of living out at Resurrection City to hear from them what was needed, and then back over to the Pitis Motel, where SCLC was needed, where Dr. Abernathy was staying. But it was staff were staying, where Dr. Abernathy was staying. And again so both a struggle and the poor were so moving, and again so determined to try to do what they could, and so needy, and so I guess my expectation was just to sort of get through the day and to get them heard, to see if the country can't respond.

in the context of Bobby Kennedy's assassination because Bobby Kennedy had been with us in Atlanta at Martin's funeral. And many of us began to see in him a hope for the future. We kind of transferred a little of our loyalty, a little of our trust, and a little of our hope to him, and now he was gone too.

#### WILLIAM RUTIMORD

I think the impression that Resurrection City was a failing cause occurred probably two or three weeks into the campaign. That is, we had anticipated a reaction on the part of the American public under the impact of the publicity that we had hoped to generate; that would have helped achieve the goal in focusing attention on the plight of the poor in America. And within two or three weeks after the demonstrations at the Department of Justice, at the FBI Building, at the Department of Agriculture, and so on, it became more and more clear that this was not happening; it was not about to happen. In fact, I would say that the culmination of the Poor People's Campaign, which left thwarted and frustrated the hundreds and thousands of people who had come from all parts of the country, who had no homes to go to, who were deeply buried in poverty and who remained buried in poverty despite the Poor People's Campaign, and were left completely stranded—they were the survivors of what could be described as the Little Bighorn of the civil rights movement.

I think the spirit went out of people. There were people there who had no place to go. People who had come to Washington, had come to Resurrection City with a great deal of hope and who had none left. When I say it was the Little Bighorn of the civil rights movement, in fact it was the end of the hopes and dreams of many, many people who had come from various parts of the country to participate. It was a very sad, depressed, and depressing scene altogether. We had terrible weather at the time. The city was bogged down in mud and rain. Resurrection City was as bad as any battlefield there could have been in any of the great wars with the foot soldiers slopping through the mud.

There were really very sad scenes. There were people with no place to go, clinging to these frame shanties. It was an instant shantytown there. People with very few possessions, poor possessions, things you wonder why or how a human being could

have their total worldly goods reduced to such a small lot of almost nothing. Friends saying good-bye, friends being separated. Strangers who had become friends during the weeks of the Poor People's Campaign and Resurrection City. It was a very unhappy and miserable scene from every point of view—the point of view of the weather, the results of the campaign, and so on.

The last day of Resurrection City—I can continue this simile about a camp at the end of a battle or a war—the camp was largely abandoned, very few people were left. They had been warned. They had been given a delay to leave the premises and they were being in effect evicted by the Capitol and Park Police. There was a cap that went off and it sounded like a shot. Of course, everyone was very apprehensive and nervous about possible violence. And of course it was not a shot. I don't know really what the noise was, perhaps a firecracker. But the police in this long blue line moved forward and they actually fired tear gas, and we got a good whiff of tear gas, those of us who were supervising or serving as observers for the evacuation of the camp. And there was the smoke from the tear gas rising from the ground, again, like an abandoned battlefield. As you moved forward across the site, it was literally at the end of a major battle, a battle of the poor, and they had lost.

Resurrection City was torn down on June 24, 1968. Jesse Jackson had served as its unofficial mayor.

#### JESSE JACKSON

When Resurrection City was closed down there was a sense of betrayal, a sense of abandonment. The dreamer had been killed in Memphis and there was an attempt now to kill the dream itself, which was to feed the hungry, which was to bring the people together, and rather than come forth with a plan to wipe out malnutrition, they were wiping out the malnourished. The first time I had ever really experienced tear gas was in Resurrection City. They drove us out with tear gas. They gassed us. They shot the struggle moving—if you will, to keep hope alive. I left there with an awful sense of betrayal and abandonment.



Roger Watkins had been involved in Justice Department negotiations with campaign leaders.

#### ROGER WATKINS

Right after Resurrection City was emptied out, I was told to go out to Fourteenth and U by the attorney general because there was an imminent riot. When I got there the intersection was all filled with volatile young people who clearly wanted to start a riot. And I looked around, and up on the back of a flatbed truck there was young Jesse Jackson, who was about twenty-six years old at the time. And he was preaching. And he was saying, "I am somebody. If you're somebody, you don't riot. Say after me, 'I am somebody.' If you are somebody, you go out and you build strong black people. Say after me, 'I am somebody.'" What Jesse was doing was preaching the riot out of those people. He's preaching, really, pride. "If you are somebody, you build up, you don't tear down. Say after me, 'I am somebody.'" He kept on preaching, kept on preaching. He was taking quite a risk. 'Cause to preach nonviolence and to preach no rioting to a group of kids who wanted to tear the place down was taking a risk that you'd be called an Uncle Tom. Jackson took the risk, he preached the people down. They became calm, they went home, there was no riot. It was quite a remarkable performance for a twenty-six-year-old kid.

#### MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

When Resurrection City was done, I never thought about giving up. I thought about how do I get up and figure out a new way to keep going. I don't think anybody ever has a right to give up on children or give up on the poor. The needs remain. The needs grow. I was raised at a time by black adults—my daddy was a preacher like Dr. King—where, if you saw a need, you tried to respond. And they showed us by personal example how to respond. In my little hometown in rural, segregated South Carolina, there was no playground where black kids could go and play, because we were segregated. So my daddy built a playground behind the church. There was no black home for the aged in South Carolina to take the elderly. So my daddy and mama

started one, and we kids were taught to serve and clean and cook. So we learned that it was our responsibility to take care of the elderly. The question was never why, if there was a need, should somebody else do something. We were taught to ask, Why don't I do something? And Dr. King and Whitney Young and others of the sixties reinforced that in college. Dr. King struggled and went through his doubts. He was often discouraged. He was often depressed. He didn't know where he was going to go from day to day, despite the larger vision for what was right for America, and so what right did we have not to try to carry on? None of us had his eloquence and certainly not his goodness, but in our own ways, with our hands and our limited visions, we can try and craft together his dream.

on the other hand, a need for perspective. "I'll never forget, I was standing, at one point, next to a reporter from the *New York Times*, and he was obviously saddened by Dr. King's death. He was an important writer for the *Times*. Recalling an article on Vietnam and Dr. King, an editorial very critical and highly mis-leading which helped to fan the flames of discontent with Martin, painting him as unpatronic, making people quite angry with him and the movement, I could not help but tell him that this grievous moment was in part the result of a climate of hate and distortion that the *New York Times* and other papers had helped create. In particular the way the *Washington Post* wrote its editorial on Dr. King and Vietnam. It was misleading. It was punitive. It was a great disservice to a great cause. And at the funeral when I said this, I didn't say it to him as a personal accusation. I said it because I wanted him to understand that no one could be exempted from responsibility if in the protection of special interests we abandoned moral responsibility. Just coming to grievance the loss was no cleansing of guilt. History would remember what the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and other journals had done to make this moment realizable. I told him that the time would come again when his power and that of his paper would be put to the test. New leaders obviously are going to come. There's going to be a new wave of need for revolt, a new wave of demand and it would even be global.

Two months before his assassination, King had spoken to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and offered what could be described as his own eulogy:

"Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. And I don't think of it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, 'What is it that I would want said?' And I leave the word to you this morning."

"If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize, that isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards, that's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school."

"I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for some body to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love

## KING'S LAST CRUSADE, 1967-1968

somebody. I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life, to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try to visit those in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity."

"Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind."



[When an ambulance arrived,] I went with him, rode with him in the back of the ambulance. And I committed civil disobedience and I would not leave the operating room. And finally the doctor came over to me and said, "You are Dr. Abernathy? He will not survive. It will be an act of mercy, because he would be paralyzed from his waist down. You may have your last moments with him."

And I went over and took him in my arms. And he breathed his last breath.

With one of his colleagues, William Rutherford had left Memphis after an afternoon staff meeting with King.

#### WILLIAM RUTHERFORD

We returned to Atlanta by plane. We arrived in Atlanta airport, took a taxi to the SCLC office, and it was a scene of total pandemonium as we arrived at the office on Auburn Avenue. People were screaming and fainting and literally rending themselves, tearing their clothing and so on and so forth, and we said, "What on earth is happening?" And some young woman screamed at us, "Dr. King has been shot. Dr. King has been shot." I said, "Well, that's hardly possible. We just left him. Just left him." So I went in the office and attempted to telephone to Memphis, and of course I couldn't get through for hours. But then we had the radio on and we began hearing the radio broadcast that reported not only that he had been shot, but that he actually had died. That was the way we learned of his death, having left him. All of the senior staff was with him in Memphis, either at the time of his death or very shortly before.

Oh, it took me ages and ages to accept the fact that Dr. King was definitely dead. He was such an active man. He was such a force and a presence, and it was just unbelievable and, I suppose, psychologically unacceptable that he would not be coming back. And in the midst of all this chaos and pandemonium in the SCLC office and headquarters, I kept expecting Dr. King to walk through the door at any minute saying, "All right, come on, this is great. But why don't we stop the nonsense now and get back to work."

As news of King's assassination spread, black communities across the country reacted with violence. Disorders broke out in 110 cities, more than seventy-five thousand National Guardsmen were called out, and thirty-nine people were killed.

#### HARRY BELAFONTE

The giving in to the loss of Dr. King erupted, but only in moments. The real sense of grieving about him did not come for me, and I think for my wife and a lot of others, until much later. When I flew immediately to Atlanta, there was this bewildering invasion of people, all these faces that we had never seen before, never knew before. All kinds of people, many of whom had come to this tragic moment as if it was a photo opportunity. I don't mean to discredit many who came out of real, genuine concern and goodwill, but there were others who saw in it a time that could be manipulated. So we had to do what we could to sort out those who came with an agenda, who were going to be the manipulators, from those who wanted to help move on with Dr. King's mission, who felt that the momentum of the movement should not falter. In a private conversation I had with Coretta King, we talked about going to Memphis, being there, to meet up with the garbage workers, to carry on the campaign and to do so immediately even before Dr. King was laid to rest. Everybody in the family agreed that it was appropriate. So I arranged for a plane and the necessary support to give Coretta and others mobility to do what had to be done. It was important that this nation know that even in the midst of our grief we were still committed to the objectives of the movement and that the fallen Dr. King did not leave behind a movement that, in the midst of this great tragedy, would lose its courage or its vision.

There was a sense at Dr. King's funeral that we were at a moment in history that was unique. All those hundreds of thousands of people who came there had a sense of oneness that I've never quite experienced anywhere else again.

It's interesting about death. At the March on Washington, a major convening of very diverse groups, Dr. King was alive and we had a great sense of ourselves and our power. It was another thing to be in this other environment, equally dramatic. Dealing with this huge and undefinable loss, very diverse groups of people, on the one hand, feeling close to their fellow humans and